DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 786 HE 013 705

AUTHOR Kemmis, Stephen
TITLE Symmetrical Communications: Developing Mutual Understanding and Consensus in Course Teams.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty: *Communication Problems: Curriculum Development: Foreign Countries: *Group Dynamics: Higher Education: *Interaction Process Analysis: Interpersonal Relationship: *Interprofessional Relationship: Social Behavior: *Team Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Australia: *Deakin University (Australia)

ABSTRACT

The notion of symmetrical communication and its application in course teams at Deakin University, Australia, are considered. Symmetry in communications is evident in groups characterized by mutual recognition by members of one another as persons accepted and appreciated in their common striving for mutual understanding and consensus. The technique used by the course team is based on informal videotape analysis and group discussion of blockages to communication. Since conflict and misunderstanding may generate disaffection within a group that alienates members and reduces their commitment to the group project, the symmetrical communication process is designed to recognize and counter these dysfunctional tendencies. Videotapes of group meetings are replayed, and whenever a group member notices some blockage to communication or some constructive contribution, the videotape is stopped. Individuals involved in the incident are invited to enlarge on their actions or reactions or comment upon the group process. Then wider group discussion begins, and the group attempts to confirm the apparent pattern, find reasons for the blockage, or interpret the group effects of the incident. Where possible and appropriate, strategies for preventing the blockage or overcoming its immediate effects are suggested. Main points emerging from these discussions are recorded as minutes on overhead transparencies when possible, and later photocopied and distributed to participants. Some of the group interaction factors that emerged through this process at Deakin University are identified. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED198786

HE

SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATIONS:

DEVELOPING MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND

CONSENSUS IN COURSE TEAMS

Stephen Kemmis
Deakin University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stephen Kemmis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

HE 013 705

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the notion of "symmetrical communication" is discussed. Symmetry in communications is evident in groups characterised by mutual recognition by members of one another as persons accepted and appreciated in their common striving for mutual understanding and consensus. The paper describes how a group of Deakin University staff members went about developing the arts of symmetrical communications in their own working group, and some of the things they learned in the process. The technique used by the group is based on informal videotape analysis and group discussion of blockages to communication. The development of such skills seems especially useful for improving the work of course teams which depend upon mutual understanding and consensus if the courses they develop and teach are to make the best use of the joint resources of the team.

At the May 1979 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), Dietrich Brandt of the University of Aachen offered a workshop on "symmetrical communications". According to Brandt and his co-workers Bruno Werner and Irene Drexler, symmetry in communications is evident in groups characterised by mutual recognition by members of one another as persons appreciated and accepted in their common striving for mutual understanding and consensus.

The thesis of the Aachen group is this: a working group tends to become communicatively incompetent, less satisfying for participants and less effective as a group capable of producing joint commitment to agreed action when communications in the group are distorted by considerations of status, internal power-politics or members' failure to respect one anothers' points of view. Suspension of status-considerations is necessary to achieve a climate where reason prevails and where group decisions are the most defensible ones, given the group's combined resources. Internecine politicking must be suspended to promote the community self-interest of the group and the attainment of consensus and joint commitment, and to avoid the group's coming to serve the self-interests of only a small part of its membership. Recognition and acceptance of members is necessary to achieve representation of all members' perspectives within the group forum and so to engage the disparate interests and perspectives of members and build these into

a framework of common understandings and shared perspectives which promotes the community self interest.

Brandt's workshop at the 1979 Annual Conference introduced participants to a technique for promoting symmetrical communication in groups in higher education. Groups are videotaped in the course of their discussions, the tape is replayed and the "moderator" invites members to participate in the identification and analysis of blockages to symmetrical communication, and the formulation of strategies to achieve greater symmetry in communication.

At Deakin University, much of our course development work takes place in course teams. Like groups in higher education institutions everywhere, these teams have communications problems which are the product of asymmetrical communications. Since so much of our work depends on achieving joint commitment to courses developed as wholes -- as curricula, not just aggregates of individual perspectives -- it seemed to us to be useful to invite Dietrich Brandt to spend a few days with us helping us to learn techniques for developing symmetrical communications. This he did, using essentially the same approach as in the HERDSA workshop.

In this brief paper, the progress of the group in using the strategies suggested by Brandt is reported. A videotape is also available which depicts the use of the technique by the Deakin group.

A number of interested staff at Deakin attended the Brandt workshop on Friday, June 1st, 1979. The group consisted of "course assistants" who work on course teams in a variety of roles (from clerical assistance through research assistance and editing to academic development roles), members of the University's Production Unit, and academic staff involved in course development and teaching (from a number of different course teams). One role for the "Symmetrical Communications Working Group" (as it came to be called) was to explore the possibility of giving course assistants a role in the development of symmetrical communications in course teams.

For a variety of reasons, the focus of the group changed. These reasons included the availability of participants' time, the apparent intransigence of some course teams to the development of a more symmetrical communications, the level of commitment required to develop the techniques over time, and the emerging interests of the participant group which settled down at about ten members of whom only three or four were course assistants. The focus remained largely on the development of symmetrical communications in course teams, though it was increasingly perceived as a matter for all course team members, not just course assistants. Course team chairpersons may have a special role in bringing about greater symmetry of communications, as might course assistants, but any member could intervene in the group process to reveal blockages to communication and help to achieve greater symmetry. Some participants in the Working Group also saw the wider applicability of the concept and the techniques for developing it; for this reason, the Working Group began to consider the variety of groups and committees throughout the University where symmetrical communications might fruitfully be developed. Members also considered the development of symmetrical communications in teaching/learning relationships.

We have some hopes of longer-term developments in symmetrical communications in our approach to teaching and learning at Deakin. A final possibility was that the Working Group might seek some kind of consultancy role with respect to course teams in the University more generally and use the techniques we had explored in this wider context. This last possibility was rejected on the grounds that seeking this "service" or "technical" role was contradictory to the basic principle of symmetrical communication. We recognised that we could accept such a role if invited to do so, but that we would then be obliged to adopt the strategy of the "hidden compromise" developed by the Aachen team in their relations with higher education teachers: pretending to be "expert" in order to gain access to and credibility with our colleages, but only serving as "moderators" of the process who helped members of groups to articulate their reactions to communications blockages they already experienced; developing group sensitivity about the signs, symptoms and consequences of communications blockages; helping the group to formulate strategies for overcoming asymmetry and the blockages to group process caused by asymmetry; and ultimately helping the group to become self-sustaining in the development of symmetrical communication (one sign of which would be dispensing with the services of the outside "moderator").

It was not, and is not, the view of the Working Group that course teams can operate entirely without conflict or misunderstanding. On the contrary, the occurrence of conflict and misunderstanding is natural as groups work towards consensus and mutual understanding.

But conflict and misunderstanding may generate disaffection within a group which alienates members and reduces their commitment to the group project. Should this state of affairs become endemic to the group's process, then the prospect of joint commitment in a common task recedes, and the group project may disintegrate along the lines of self interest (or sub-group interests) within the group. More commonly groups reach a dynamic equilibrium at some level of entrenched disaffection and internecine rivalry, sometimes remaining more productive, sometimes less. Hierarchy, compulsion and status may provide the "glue" which holds such groups together, but its consequences may be experienced by group members in degeneration of group commitment, fragmentation of the framework of common understanding, and feelings of dissatisfaction, alienation or exploitedness among members whose interests are not being served in the working relationship.

"Symmetrical communications" as a concept is a description of an ideal process in which these dysfunctional tendencies are consciously recognised and deliberately countered. It is our project as a Working Group to discover strategies by which we might foster individually-satisfying and mutually-productive group relations.

Our method in our regular meetings was this:

1 The group met and discussed a topic decided in advance. The topic was usually one of particular concern to one or a few members but relevant (as far as possible) to all our interests. For example, in one session we discussed a proposed evaluation of Deakin University Study Centres. In another, we discussed the possibility of making a

film about the operation of course teams at Deakin.

2 These discussions were videotaped by a member of the group. The role of videotaping was shared among members in different sessions and was relatively inexpert: we all shared in the learning process and developed some sense of more useful material for subsequent discussion of group processes and individual responses. We also chose to use the least sophisticated technology: black and white portapack equipment which could be readily replayed in the small seminar rooms where we met, no special lighting, no special microphones outside the one in the camera, and so on. We wanted equipment we could use rather than high-quality production equipment for public performances. (The "production" videotape of our work is unrepresentative in this respect, since we were obliged to meet in a Deakin studio to produce higher-quality material, and we felt the discussion was slightly stilted under the bright lights and in the presence of studio-technicians with their sophisticated equipment).

3 After the videotaping session, which usually lasted about twenty-five minutes, we replayed the videotape. Whenever some member of the group noticed some blockage to communication, some individual reaction of discomfort, some especially constructive contribution or some other pattern of interaction which deserved comment, the videotape would be stopped. A relevant section might be replayed. Individuals involved in the incident of interest would be invited to enlarge on their actions or reactions, explain their points of view, speak to the significance of the incident in the group process, or otherwise help to make the group process transparent. Then wider group discussion would begin, with the group attempting to confirm the apparent pattern, find reasons for the blockage, or interpret the group effects of the incident. Where possible and appropriate, strategies for preventing the blockage or overcoming its immediate effects were suggested. Of course it was important to develop and maintain an attitude of trust, good humour, empathy and constructiveness. We were not a therapy group attempting to analyse each other as individuals; we were attempting, as far as possible, to understand the processes in which we played parts and the events we influenced and were influenced by. It should be remembered that we were an "artificial" group meeting solely for this purpose, so we did not have to overcome the habitual forms and asymmetries which more permanent groups may need to confront. But it should not be thought that the fact of our transience made us so different: the group contained members who have constant working relationships, and we quickly recognised that we were developing stable roles and interests within our group, as well as importing some habitual patterns from other groups of which we are members into the Working Group.

4 Main points emerging from these discussions were recorded as "minutes" on overhead transparencies when this was possible -- in this way, all participants could see how our learnings (and the minutes) were shaping up. These transparencies were later photocopied and distributed to participants as a record of the meeting.

This process was repeated in five meetings after the original

workshop and before we began preparations for "going public" -- making the videotape which we hoped might serve as a discussion-starter for other interested groups in Deakin or beyond.

Some of the things that attracted our attention in the regular discussion-sessions included:

- the development and the effects of "rules" for "turn-taking" in some discussions

- the effect of conversational gambits like "that's a good question" or "that's interesting" which could be used by one speaker to patronise or dismiss another while apparently supporting him

- the use of the "filibuster" by a speaker to cloud the moment-by-moment interplay of a discussion and gain initiative or dominance

- the use of desks by participants as "platforms" to gesture against or retreat behind

- the pervasive phenomenon that participants in group discussions simply don't listen to one another or hear one anothers' point of view as "real" -- and often systematically ignore one another while planning privately and waiting for an opportunity to make the next point

- the general relation of gesturing to speaking (sometimes small agitated movements indicated that a participant was about to speak or wanted to come into the discussion)

- the general phenomenon that small muscle movements often indicated tension or anxiety (our videotapes contained a great deal of footage of fingers, hands and feet moving restlessly).

Our analyses helped us to find patterns in our interaction which may or may not be typical of other groups, but which suggested more global group effects and strategies for overcoming some kinds of problems. For example,

- members becoming "scapegoats" in moments of group crisis in discussion

- the politics of establishing a base for a point of view by appealing to likely supporters and isolating likely opponents

- the "neutral chairmanship" role of sorting out problems in communication

- the strategy of documenting approaches to agreement in discussion by using an overhead projector, butcher's paper or a blackboard to keep "visible minutes"

- the value of defusing contentious issues by seeking agreement on prior points, reflecting on claims made by speakers after conceding their potential merits or intervening in a debate to ask "what's going on here?"

- possible roles for course team members in monitoring group interaction and interfering with group processes explicitly to establish mutual

comprehension, to encourage members to contribute, to clarify issues or to support chairpersons in a non-threatening way.

In general, the group enjoyed the opportunity to meet for two or three hours about once a month to reflect on the prcesses in which we are constantly engaged: the processes of discussion and decision in groups. Even this little self-reflection seemed educative: too often we are involved in these processes as unconscious or intuitive actors, carrying habitual modes of response into new groups, reflecting relatively little, or learning not enough from our experience.

At its last meeting for 1979, the group began by doubting whether we had a sufficient commonality of interests or sufficient motivation to continue working together. Before too long, however, we had reached consensus that we should at least continue into 1980 to make a videotape about the processes we had used, as a stimulus to others. More importantly, perhaps, we have begun to apply what we have learned in other groups of which we are members -- as strategies for promoting symmetrical communication. It is, in a sense, an ideological commitment based on distaste for hierarchy, distrust for compulsion, and dissatisfaction with the cynicism and self-interest of small-time group politics. But there are positive reasons for employing the arts of symmetrical communication which transcend what is negative about group or committee work which has become a tedious and habitual experience of compromise and which preserves the shreds of self-interest in a climate of contention. At the risk of sounding too much the Pollyanna, these positive reasons are that groups can work together to serve common interests, achieve recognition and acceptance of their members as persons, and establish joint commitment to common projects when they do so on the basis of reasoned discussion and free commitment. For perhaps more tasks than we care to admit, such aspirations are achievable.

References

Brandt, D., "European approaches to staff development". Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Brisbane, Australia, May 11-14, 1979.

Werner, B. and Drexler, I., "Structures of communication and interaction in courses for junior staff members of the Faculties of Engineering, TH Aachen." In D. Brandt (Ed.) The HDZ Aachen - Activities and Context. Report prepared for the Fourth International Conference "Improving University Teaching", Aachen, Germany, July 25-29, 1978.